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ABSTRACT

This study examined barriers facing rural schools in serving students at-risk and the perceptions of teachers, parents, and administrators related to the difficulty in changing these barriers. Seventeen rural school districts representing 5 counties in southern Ohio participated in the study. The survey collected 846 completed responses from parents, teachers, and administrators. The survey items were ranked on a likert scale to measure the perceived barrier and the possible change. Student and family variables such as low self-esteem, early school failure, and lack of parental involvement were rated high. These barriers were also viewed as moderately difficult or very difficult to change. The barriers perceived easy to change were related to the school such as informing the community about school operations and utilizing volunteers. Collaboration is a possible approach to involving key school and community personnel in addressing the needs of rural students at-risk and securing additional services and intervention for at-risk students. Appendix includes survey results. (LP)

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Rural Students At-Risk:
Perceptions of Parents, Teachers, and Administrators

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RUNNING HEAD: RURAL STUDENTS AT-RISK

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Abstract

Seventeen rural school districts in Southern Ohio collaborated to identify the barriers they faced in serving students at-risk. A survey was utilized to obtain the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators (n = 846). Barriers (survey items) were ranked along with the respondents' perceptions of the degree to which they believed the barriers could be changed. Results indicated a large degree of agreement between these groups on the barrier statements. Collaboration is discussed as a possible approach to involving key school and community personnel in addressing the needs of rural students at-risk.

Rural Students At-Risk:

Perceptions of Parents, Teachers, and Administrators

Recently, more attention has been given to a diverse group of students considered at-risk (e.g., Barona & Garcia, 1990; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). Although definitions of "at-risk" vary slightly, these students are generally those who fall behind academically and may develop other negative student behaviors (e.g., conduct problems, truancy, alienation from the school) that eventually lead to dropping out of school and/or not achieving gainful employment (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989).

Furthermore, students at-risk are often described as having low self-esteem, poor emotional health, lacking life goals, having no self-discipline, (Brodinsky et al. 1989) and lacking motivation (Alderman, 1990). In addition, family factors related to at-risk status have been documented including poverty conditions, limited English speaking, low parental involvement, insularity, low level of parental education in school activities, single parent home, and lack of parental skills related to academic and mainstream parent-school interactions (OERI, 1990).

Collaboration has been recommended as an option for schools, and particularly rural schools, to use in order to secure additional services for students and/or to develop interventions. Successful collaboration requires effective

problem-solving. Thus, the problems related to the population and concern(s) of interest should be clearly defined with solutions generated, implemented, and follow-up conducted (e.g., Andringa & Fustin, 1991; Curtis & Meyers, 1988).

In order for collaboration to be effective, the input of key individuals who may have an impact on the potential solutions should be obtained. Without that input, important factors and issues may be overlooked. Moreover, human nature as it is, individuals may feel overlooked and/or unappreciated if their input is not sought. Thus, in planning for change within schools, groups such as parents, teachers, and administrators all play key roles.

In this project, Hopewell Special Education Regional Resource Center (SERRC), in cooperation with the rural school districts it served, wanted to identify the barriers these rural schools faced in serving students at-risk (e.g., family barriers, organization barriers, student barriers) and to obtain the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators related to the identified barriers. In addition, their perceptions regarding the difficulty of changing these barriers was obtained. These barriers were then used as the basis for follow-up planning to address the identified barriers.

Methods

Setting

The setting included seventeen school districts representing five counties in Southern Ohio. These districts had agreed to a consortium effort with Hopewell SERRC to plan and implement programs for students at-risk.

The first responsibility of each district was to identify one or two individuals to serve on an advisory council to represent their districts in guiding the program planning and development process. Thirty-one individuals, including principals, regular and special education supervisors, were designated by their superintendents and formed the advisory council. The tasks of the advisory council were to (a) assist in identifying the barriers related to serving students at-risk in order to develop a survey, (b) insure the participation of key individuals within their districts, (c) assist in survey distribution and collection, and (d) plan strategies to address the identified barriers within their districts and within the region.

Survey Development. The first phase consisted of identifying barriers that these rural schools faced in developing and implementing programs for students at-risk. A barrier was defined as something organizational, familial, or instructional that makes it difficult to implement

effective educational and/or social adjustment programs for students at-risk. For example, quite often, teachers report that administrative support or sanction is needed prior to implementing substantive changes within their classrooms. In these situations, a barrier may exist because the teachers may perceive change to be beyond their control.

Step One. In the Spring of 1990, a group of 20 regular and special education supervisors in the five county region generated lists of barriers they faced in educating students at-risk. From this list of barriers, a draft of a survey was written.

Step Two. The literature on students at-risk was reviewed and additional items for the survey were included based on the literature. In all, 41 items were included in they survey that were considered to be barriers to serving students at-risk.

Step Three. The survey was critiqued by a university faculty member in a school psychology program, five superintendents from the rural region, eight members of the advisory council and piloted on a group of 15 parents who were members of a parent advisory council. Revisions to the wording of the items and general format were made based on this feedback.

Two general questions were asked about each item of the survey. The first question was related to the degree to

which the items were perceived as barriers (e.g., Is it a barrier?) and secondly, the degree to which respondents perceived the items or barriers could be changed (e.g., Can it be changed?). Respondents could answer each item on a five point Likert scale (1 = very minor barrier to 5 = very major barrier and 1 = very easy to change to 5 = very difficult to change).

Survey Distribution. The advisory council members were utilized to distribute surveys to their respective districts. An attempt was made to obtain a representative sample from groups of parents, administrators and teachers from the 49 elementary schools within the region. In order to do this, the following directions were given to the advisory council. First, each principal of the 49 elementary schools was asked to complete a survey. Second, the principal was asked to select randomly three teachers within his/her building to complete the survey. And third, each selected teacher was requested to select randomly three parents of students in their classes to complete the survey. In addition, the superintendents of each district were asked to complete a survey and to distribute them to school board members and business representatives within their districts.

Results

Survey Analysis

846 surveys were returned and analyzed. The separate

groups included parents (n = 476), teachers (n = 252), principals (n = 32), superintendents (n = 8), school board members (n = 20), and unknown (n = 58). This represented approximately a 65% return rate. Means were computed on each item. The items were ranked by their being perceived as a barrier and the degree to which individuals perceived they could be changed. In Table 1, the ranked items by their means as barriers and corresponding ratings of their likelihood for change are presented.

Insert Table 1

about here

As might have been predicted based on available research, student and family variables such as student low self-esteem, early school failure, lack of parental involvement were the top barriers. In fact, of the top 14 barriers with means above the criterion of "major barrier" (>4), ten were student and family variables. Unfortunately perhaps, these barriers were also viewed as moderately difficult to very difficult to change. The perceived easiest barriers to change were those related to the school such as informing the community about school operations, utilizing volunteers, and giving teachers administrative approval in classroom adaptations.

A comparison between teachers, parents, and administrators (principals, superintendents, and school board representatives were collapsed to form the administrator group) on the barrier statements was made. An examination of the means for each group showed agreement between these groups on a majority of the items. This might indicate that these groups are generally in agreement on the barriers related to serving students at-risk, particularly those salient items such as low student self-esteem, lack of parental involvement and parents' lack of perceived ability to help their child as well as other child and family issues. The only differences between the groups were seen on lower ranked items, generally related to administrative and curricular items in which parents might have limited knowledge. In Table 2, the means for each group are presented.

Discussion

For rural schools, it appears that collaboration is a possible option to secure additional support and services. Collaboration involves individuals from various settings, agencies, and/or perspectives joining together to solve problems related to serving students. In this current project, individuals from various disciplines (e.g., school psychologists, teachers, administrators) came together in an attempt to find better ways to deal with students at-risk.

In addition, parental input was viewed as a critical component. In fact, many parents expressed very positive feelings about being asked their opinions.

Parents, teachers, and administrators all play important roles in the success of educating students at-risk. Collaboration between these groups may help to allow important communication that will assist in planning effective programs and interventions. As indicated by their perceptions in this present survey, these groups agreed that the issues such as early school success, student self-esteem, and parental involvement are of major importance if schools wish to change to serve better these students.

Certainly, the at-risk group is a very large and diverse group. Numerous strategies and approaches may be needed. However, it may be possible to break down this enormous problem by clearly defining in smaller units the overall problem using collaboration. Although a survey was utilized in this present study, other data generating strategies such as interviews and individual and group problem-solving techniques might be used to further clarify the problems schools face in serving students at-risk (e.g., Andringa & Fustin, 1991).

Specific strategies have been found to be effective with students at-risk (e.g., Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). Yet, as has been the case quite often,

implementation does not occur without collaboration and appropriate administrative support. The success of the planning component of this project was a direct result of the combined efforts of superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and support personnel. Their willingness to work together and share their respective viewpoints on the problems that these rural schools faced was critical (e.g., Joyce. 1991). The next phase of this project is currently being implemented. This includes efforts to implement several of the strategies generated and defined by the advisory council. Evaluation of this effort will be forthcoming.

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Table 1

Rank Order by Means of Perceived Barriers and their Likelihood for Change (N = 846)

Rank		Is it a Barrier?	Can it be Changed?
1.	At-risk students exhibit lower self-esteem.	4.4	3.7
2.	At-risk students have lower beliefs about their own abilities.	4.4	3.6
3.	At-risk students experience school failure early-on and often do not catch up.	4.3	3.4
4.	There is not enough parent involvement in their child's education.	4.3	3.9
5.	At-risk students lack motivation which may be a result of early life as well as school experience.	4.3	3.9
6.	There is an overwhelming task created by the range of academic skills and emotional needs in a large class which includes at-risk students.	4.2	3.7
7.	The cost to implement new programs for at-risk students.	4.2	3.9
8.	Many parents of at-risk students did not succeed in school and have not been able to instill confidence in their children.	4.1	4.1
9.	There is not enough time and/or energy for many single parents to give to their children.	4.1	4.0
10.	Parent's drug/alcohol abuse.	4.1	4.3
11.	Many at-risk students from families of divorce have adjustment problems which affect their academics.	4.1	4.0
12.	Many parents of at-risk students do not take an active role in school programs such as PTO or volunteer programs.	4.1	3.9
13.	There are too few school personnel such as counselors and/or psychologists (especially at the elementary level) to work individually and in small groups with at-risk students.	4.0	3.3
14.	There is not sufficient recognition of shared ownership of the problem (e.g., between parents,		

Table 1 (continued)

Rank Order by Means of Perceived Barriers and their Likelihood for Change (N = 846)

Rank	Is it a Barrier?	Can it be Changed?
educators, and the community.	4.0	3.5
15. Many parents of at-risk students do not believe they have the knowledge or skills to help their children.	3.9	3.7
16. Many parents of at-risk students have low academic expectations for their children.	3.9	3.7
17. Student drug/alcohol abuse.	3.9	3.8
18. Many parents of at-risk students have low career expectations for their children.	3.9	3.7
19. The physical needs of severely handicapped students can not be met in the regular classroom.	3.8	3.6
20. There are too many students in regular classes for teachers to give enough time to at-risk students.	3.8	3.2
21. There are too few early intervention programs to prevent teenage pregnancy.	3.8	3.1
22. Low academic achievement is often expected of at-risk students.	3.7	3.1
23. There is not enough in-depth training on meeting the needs of at-risk students in the regular classroom.	3.7	3.0
24. Many at-risk students come from families whose income is below established poverty levels.	3.7	4.2
25. There are too few support personnel such as counselors and/or psychologists to assist teachers in implementing new programs for at-risk students.	3.6	3.1
26. There is not enough communication among commuity agencies (e.g., mental health, law enforcement, social service).	3.4	2.9
27. At-risk students are not identified early enough.	3.4	2.7

Table 1 (cont.)

Rank	Is it a Barrier?	Can it be Changed?
28. Standardized group testing makes it difficult to individualize instruction to the needs of at-risk students.	3.4	3.0
29. There is not enough instructional time to implement new programs in regular classes.	3.3	3.2
30. There are not enough volunteer programs.	3.2	2.7
31. There are not enough vocational options for rural at-risk students.	3.1	3.0
32. There is not enough use of community agencies that exists.	3.1	2.7
33. Teachers are not given enough administrative permission in classroom insructional and curricular decision making.	3.1	2.5
34. Pupil performance objectives make it difficult to individualize instruction to the needs of at-risk students.	3.0	2.9
35. There is too much reliance on textbooks and worksheets.	3.0	2.6
36. There is not enough collaboration among regular and special education personnel to serve at-risk students.	2.9	2.5
37. The community isn't informed about school operations.	2.9	2.2
38. The curriculum is too inflexible to adapt it to the individual needs of at-risk students.	2.9	2.8
39. Administrative approval is needed prior to implementing new programs for at-risk students.	2.9	2.6
40. Volunteers in existing programs are not used enough.	2.9	2.3
41. Process of change to any new program is too difficult.	2.7	2.7

Note: For "Is it a Barrier?", respondents selected from a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very minor barrier, 2 = minor barrier, 3 = moderate barrier, 4 = major barrier, and 5 = very major barrier. For "Can it be changed" respondents selected from a 5-point Likert scale (1 =

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very easy to change, 2 = easy to change, 3 = moderately easy to change, 4 = hard to change, and 5 = very hard to change).

Table 2

Comparison between Teachers, Parents and Administrators on the Barrier Statements

Rank	Group Ratings (Means) Overall (n=846)	Teacher (n=252)	Parent (n=476)	Admin. (n=60)
1. At risk students exhibit lower self-esteem.	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.2
2. At-risk students have lower beliefs about their own abilities.	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.2
3. At-risk students experience school failure early-on and often do not catch up.	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.1
4. There is not enough parent involvement in their child's education.	4.3	4.5	4.2	4.3
5. At-risk students lack motivation which may be a result of early life as well as school experience.	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.3
6. There is an overwhelming task created by the range of academic skills and emotional needs in a large class which includes at-risk students.	4.2	4.5	4.0	4.2
7. The cost to implement new programs for at-risk students.	4.2	4.4	4.0	4.3
8. Many parents of at-risk students did not succeed in school and have not been able to instill confidence in their children.	4.1	4.5	4.0	4.3
9. There is not enough time and/or energy for many single parents to give to their children.	4.1	4.2	4.1	4.0
10. Parent's drug/alcohol abuse.	4.1	4.2	4.1	3.9
11. Many at-risk students from families of divorce have adjustment problems which affect their academics.	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.0
12. Many parents of at-risk students do not take an active role in school programs such as PTO or volunteer programs.	4.1	4.3	3.9	4.4
13. There are too few school personnel such as counselors and/or psychologists (especially at the elementary level) to work individually and in small groups with at-risk students.	4.0	4.3	3.8	4.1

Table 2 (cont.)

Comparison between Teachers, Parents and Administrators on the Barrier Statements

Rank	Group Ratings (Means) Overall (n=846)	Teacher (n=252)	Parent (n=476)	Admin. (n=60)
14. There is not sufficient recognition of shared ownership of the problem (e.g., between parents, educators, and the community.	4.0	4.2	3.9	4.0
15. Many parents of at-risk students do not believe they have the knowledge or skills to help their children.	3.9	4.1	3.8	3.9
16. Many parents of at-risk students have low academic expectations for their children.	3.9	4.0	3.8	4.1
17. Student drug/alcohol abuse.	3.9	3.8	4.1	3.1
18. Many parents of at-risk students have low career expectations for their children.	3.9	4.1	3.7	4.1
19. The physical needs of severely handicapped students can not be met in the regular classroom.	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.9
20. There are too many students in regular classes for teachers to give enough time to at-risk students.	3.8	4.3	3.6	3.6
21. There are too few early intervention programs to prevent teenage pregnancy.	3.8	3.9	3.7	3.5
22. Low academic achievement is often expected of at-risk students.	3.7	3.4	4.0	3.5
23. There is not enough in-depth training on meeting the needs of at-risk students in the regular classroom.	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.8
24. Many at-risk students come from families whose income is below established poverty levels.	3.7	4.0	3.5	3.7
25. There are too few support personnel such as counselors and/or psychologists to assist teachers in implementing new programs for at-risk students.	3.6	3.8	3.4	3.6
26. There is not enough communication among community agencies (e.g., mental health, law enforcement,				

Table 2 (cont.)

Comparison between Teachers, Parents and Administrators on the Barrier Statements

Rank	Group Ratings (Means) Overall (n=846)	Teacher (n=252)	Parent (n=476)	Admin. (n=60)
social service).	3.4	3.5	3.4	3.1
27. At-risk students are not identified early enough.	3.4	3.3	3.6	3.1
28. Standardized group testing makes it difficult to individualize instruction to the needs of at-risk students.	3.4	3.3	3.5	2.9
29. There is not enough instructional time to implement new programs in regular classes.	3.3	3.6	3.2	3.3
30. There are not enough volunteer programs.	3.2	3.1	3.3	2.6
31. There are not enough vocational options for rural at-risk students.	3.1	3.1	3.2	2.7
32. There is not enough use of community agencies that exists.	3.1	3.1	3.1	2.7
33. Teachers are not given enough administrative permission in classroom instructional and curricular decision making.	3.1	2.9	3.3	2.3
34. Pupil performance objectives make it difficult to individualize instruction to the needs of at-risk students.	3.0	2.9	3.2	2.5
35. There is too much reliance on textbooks and worksheets.	3.0	3.0	2.9	3.2
36. There is not enough collaboration among regular and special education personnel to serve at-risk students.	2.9	2.7	3.2	2.6
37. The community isn't informed about school operations.	2.9	2.8	3.0	2.5
38. The curriculum is too inflexible to adapt it to the individual needs of at-risk students.	2.9	2.7	3.1	2.3
39. Administrative approval is needed prior to implementing new programs for at-risk students.	2.9	2.7	3.1	2.2
40. Volunteers in existing programs				

Table 2 (cont.)

Comparison between Teachers, Parents and Administrators on the Barrier Statements

Rank	Group Ratings (Means) Overall (n=846)	Teacher (n=252)	Parent (n=476)	Admin. (n=60)
are not used enough.	2.9	2.7	3.1	2.2
41. Process of change to any new program is too difficult.	2.7	2.7	2.8	2.6

Note: Respondents selected from a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very minor barrier, 2 = minor barrier, 3 = moderate barrier, 4 = major barrier, and 5 = very major barrier).